lady, dropping her knife and fork, "you terrify me. What possessed us to come on this journey?"

He simpered, as one pleased with his effort, adding, "'Tis known as the worst road out of London."

"Dear heart!" cries the lady, and I saw miss whitening under the bloom she had took of the cold air.

"'Tis a pity," said I, "that simpletons talk of what they know not. 'Tis the safest road in the kingdom."

"Oh," says he, with an air, "I would not discompose any one. 'Tis best you should keep up your spirits." And he drank of his wine, whistling gently, and as one who is superior to circumstances and the rest of the company.

If he had not been so grotesque an ape I would have said something more, but as it was I had not the heart to overwhelm him in miss's presence, so I said, good-humoredly, "Well, call me when there is danger, and I will see if I can spy it out of two spectacles."

I gave miss a jorum of mulled wine and I plied her mother, who would eat anything. Never did I see a woman with such an appetite. But the old gentleman took little or nothing, and only sipped his glass, being clearly in an anxious state.

"I was promised we should lie at Petersfield tonight," he said in a plaintive way, "for I have business in Portsmouth tomorrow."

"Oh, you shall lie there safe and warm," said I, "and madam and miss, too, in as snug blankets as any in the realm, or call me hangman."

I got up and walked to the window. The black night stared back at me with ominous eyes. Thinks I to myself that we must be hauling out at once if my words were to come true; for there was snow in the sky like lead. I turned about, and under the candles saw the man in black guzzling his wine as if he were in a haste to feel its temper in his stomach. He had drunk one bottle and the better part of another. I called out to the innkeeper, bidding him ask if we were to stay there all night, for, if not, we had better be gone. And that seemed to affect the coachman, for in a little news was come that we were to start. The last I saw of the table was the figure of the man in black drinking his second bottle to the dregs.

No sooner were we set in the stage again than the storm began. The wind swept over the heights and rained on us a deadly flurry of snow. It battered against the windows and penetrated even to the recesses of the interior. But we were warm with our wine, and I, for one, lay back with contentment. The old lady went off to sleep forthwith with the food she had taken, and trumpeted at times, to the chagrin of her daughter. But what's a snore? At least it interfered not with me, and presently I was at rest like any child. The coach rocked in my dreams, and then there was a cry, and presently, after I opened my eyes with the feeling that the snow was on my temples.

'Twas not that, however, but the barrel of a pistol that the man in black held.

"Move," says he fiercely, "and you are a dead man."

As soon as I was awake I guessed what it was, and so, never stirring a hand, said I:

"That command concerns not my jaw, I conceive?"

"'Twere best you kept your mouth closed," said he.

"Why," said I, "I perceive that my prognostications were all wrong, and that we be fallen indeed into the hands of a toby-man, who will, I trust, prove as gallant as all his kidney."

"Silence!" says he, "and give me what you have."

"You have my pistols?" I asked, politely.

"Yes," he replied, triumphantly; and at that I knew he was a mere bungler, and no real gentleman of the road, for he was all a-tremble with his excitement.

"Well," said I, "there is but the matter of a small bag of guineas—"

"Hand it out!" said he, sharply.

"Look 'ee," said I; "you promise me death do I move."

"I will find it myself," he said, quickly.

But I was not for having his dirty fingers on me; so said I, with a heavy sigh, "If I must, I must," and I drew out a bag from my inner pocket.

"You have saved yourself," said he, hoarsely, and, Lord! I knew again he was new to the game, for no born toby-man would have rested content with what I gave him when there was two bags more of golden pictures safely stowed in my coat.

"Now that you have what you want," said I, meekly, "maybe you will allow me to ask after my companions."

"You will understand," said he, "that I am here with four loaded pistols, with the which I will shoot any that moves."

"Oh, I accept my fate," I replied, as if desperate. "'Tis the young lady that I am thinking on."

He laughed harshly.

"You have cast sheep's eyes enough, my good man. I have her jewels."

"D—me, now," says I, "had the jewels been in my keeping I would not have let 'em go so cheaply. Is the young gentleman in his gore?"

"No," says he, curtly.

"We have all been taken by surprise and robbed," says the voice of the old gentleman, tremulously. "This man——"

"Silence!" said the man in black.

"Are you there, miss?" said I to the darkness.

A small voice says, "Yes"—very frightened.

"Keep up your heart," said I. "We are none of us hurt, and when once this awesome ruffian——"

"I command you to be silent," said he, savagely.

"Come," said I, "let us have some liberty. You have took our goods; let us have our tongues left."

At that he said nothing, but there came an interruption. If you will believe me the old lady had slumbered through it all, and now woke up at a jolt of the coach, and cried out:

"Thieves!"

"Why, madam, you say right," said I; "thieves it is, and as ferocious a toby-man as ever I remember."

With that she fell to screaming, but the man in black clapped his pistol to her and gave her a fright that paralyzed her to silence.

"Give me what you have," says he.

"I—I have nothing," she stammered. "There is no room on me to hide so much as——"

"Bah!" says he. "If you will cease your clatter I will do you no harm."

"The gentleman has promised to do none of us harm," said I, "if we behave modestly. This coach shall not swim in blood, for the which we should fall to our prayers in thankfulness."

Whether he perceived my ironic tone and was to resent it I know not; but I would have been equal to him, the nincompoop. But just as chance had it, just at that moment the coach came to with a crash that sent him flying against the window. He flourished his pistol wildly, and I thought the fool would have let one off. Only the door opened on the other side now, and the head of the coachman peered in. My man presents at him, shouting:

"Move and you're a dead man!"

"What's all this stir?" says the coachman in amazement. "Are ye gone out of your wits?"

"No," says he; "but you shall be gone out of yours if you stir and do not as I wish."

"This gentleman," says I, in a mild voice, "has robbed the coach; and 'tis only of his kindness that we get off with our lives."

"You shall cut one of the horses loose and let me have it," said this ridiculous toby-man, "or I will blow out your brains."

"You're welcome for a horse," grumbled the other, still in astonishment; "you're welcome to 'em all, if you can get anywhere from here."

"What is it you mean?" he demanded haughtily.

"Why, we're astray—we're in a drift somewhere toward Liss—the Lord knows where," says t'other.

"Indeed," says I, imploringly, "you will not venture your valuable life on such a night."

But he uttered a savage oath, yet appeared perplexed.

"Look you," said I in another voice, "if you take the horse you will reach nowhere from here, and you will leave five hapless mortal beings to starve of cold. Let 'em get back to the road and then take your nag."

He was silent for a while, but this argument seemed to appeal to him. "Very wel," said he, "I consent; but if there be any sign of treachery I will not hesitate to shoot. Go back to your horses."

At this the coachman, no doubt well enough content to be let off at such a price, shut the door and departed, and presently the stage began to rumble on again, floundering on the hills toward Liss.

Now, you may think how I was tickled at this muckworm trying his hand at the road. He was some attorney's clerk or maybe 'prentice, I could have sworn, and he was as fidgety as a cat, seeming not to know what to do or whom to confront and bully. Moreover, my attitude had put him in a flurry, and the knowledge that we were astray had discomforted him. So he stands with his back at the door, saying nothing, but holding a barker in each fist. But I was not for letting him alone, and says I:

"You done that very well. I would I had your composure and I would have been his majesty's chief justice by now, with the hanging of rogues for my business."

At that the old gentleman plucked up spirit enough to venture on a word.

"Alack!" he said, "I fear that all those that follow a trade of violence must come by violence to their end," and sighed.

"That's the truth," said I, smacking my leg. "You have spoken the truth, if you die tonight."

"Silence!" cries this shoddy highwayman nervously.

"Your tongue wags, young man," says the fat old lady to me; "but it appears to me you did little in the defense you boasted of some time ago."

"I can't abide cold steel at my ears," said I. "Alas! that I was born to encounter so redoubtable a captain!"

"You are a soldier," says she angrily, "and you see us robbed and put about like this."

"Why, I can endure any ordinary tobyman," said I. "But this fellow is the very devil. I think any man can be excused to surrender to so vehement an antagonist. His bark's his bite," says I.

"Harringay, my smelling salts," says she petulantly.

"I—I have 'em not," stammers he.

"No," said I; "'tis all along of this gentleman with the barkers. See you! Mr. Harringay and I have had to yield up; and if one of Mr. Harringay's spirit hath done so, why, I think it no shame myself. But indeed," I went on, struck with a comic idea, "we are neither of us in need of shame, for I believe this gentleman to be a notorious gentleman of the road, with a terrible reputation. Is't not so, sir?" says I.

"You are at liberty to believe what you will," says he, but in a milder voice.

"I have heard of this gentleman," I went on, "and from his description I would take oath this is no other than Galloping Dick—Dick Ryder, that is a terror on the highways. Is it so?" says I again.

"What if I be?" says he; and I believe the huff was well pleased, as indeed he might be.

"There!" said I triumphantly; "I guessed it. And, believe me, any man might be proud to submit to Dick Ryder, from all I hear."

"Ay, I have heard of him, too," says the old gentleman; "but they say he is better than would appear, and merciful."

"Oh, never fear," said I, "this gentleman will prove merciful ere we are finished with him."

"I warn you to expect nothing from me," said he in a more complacent voice.

Just at that moment the coach began to roll along more smoothly and at a faster pace, and I judged that we were upon the road again and that the coachman was whipping up. This same thought seemed to occur to the fellow, for he opened the window and shouted out to the man to stop, with a lot of horrid threats. So that presently the coach came to and the coachman appeared at the door, seeing that his maneuver had failed.

"What is it?" he said, innocently.

"You must keep your bargain," says the man in black. "We are on the road?"

"Such road as there is," he grumbled.

"Well, cut me one of the horses out, or I will make a hole in you!" cries the fellow.

"Come," says I, "we were getting on quite famously till now; 'tis a pity to end this pleasant party."

But he gave me an oath and stepped out of the vehicle, at which I seized the young man, Harringay.

"Out with you," said I, "and we will see this mischief to an end."

We got out into the snow, which was still whirling in the air, and I watched the coachman extricate one of his nags. The toby-man (if I may so style him) stood with his legs apart, drawn up to his most dramatic posture, pistols in hand.

"You will not stir," says he, "for full ten minutes after I am gone. If you do I will come back and blow your brains out."

This truculent fellow quite appalled the coachman, who busied himself with the gear, and presently had one of his horses out. This t'other mounted in an awkward fashion, and turned to us.

"Remember," says he, in a warning voice, "I never forget or forgive."

"Now," whispered I to Harringay, "now is the chance to show your quality. You take him on the near side and I will on the off. Leg or arm will do. He will topple off on the least shove, the fool."

"But—but," he stammered, "he is armed."

"D—me," said I, furious to meet with such cowardice, "are ye frightened of a pistol in the hands of a mumchance?" And with an oath I left him and flew at my quarry.

I had got half way to him when he saw me coming and pointed a barker at me.

"Stop!" cries he.

"Stop be d—d!" says I, and sprang at him.

The pistol went off and took my hat, singeing my forehead, which made me all the hotter. I seized him leg and neck and swung him down into the snow, where he grabbed for another weapon.

"If you move," said I, "I will crack your neck like a rotten stick, my brave toby-man. Quit, you worm, quit!" and I gave him my fist between his eyes so that he lay still.

"Coachman," said I, "you may take your horse and throw a lantern here," and I fumbled in the man's pockets for a pistol. "Now," says I, "we are on terms again," and I dragged him to his feet. Harringay came up now, and says to me:

"Let me help."

"Get you gone! I want none of you!" I said, sharply. "D—me, miss will serve me better." And I called out to her.

By that time the coachman had his lantern and cast the light on the miserable, sheepish object who scowled at us.

"Here's a pretty toby-man," said I, "a right gallant fellow that sheds luster on the craft. Why, a child could manage him. See," says I, for miss was come up, looking very handsome and excited, in the snow. "Take ye this pistol, miss, and hold it to him. He will do you no harm—and never could."

She hesitated a moment and then, summoning up her courage, did as I bid, holding the barker in a gingerly fashion, the while I searched his pockets, taking out what he had took of us.

I had just completed my job when there was the sound of voices quite close, for the snow had dulled the tread of the horses of the party that approached. They were on us ere I knew, and one called out:

"What is this? Is't an accident?"

"It is a little accident to a toby-man," said I. "A brave fellow that is come by misfortune all unknown to his mother."

"The devil!" says the voice. "We are after one such. Let us see him!"

Now, you conceive how I felt, for that this was a party of traps on my heels I guessed at once. So I moved a little into the shadow of the lantern and waited while the man examined t'other.

"I do not know if this is our man," says he, "but 'tis enough if he be guilty."

"Who is your man?" asked I, emboldened by this ignorance.

"'Tis Dick Ryder," says he; "we tracked him as far as Liphook, but the one that could speak to him has been detained by a fall at the village."

"Why, this is he!" said I in triumph. "Did he not confess to being Ryder?" I asked of the others, for by this the old gentleman and his lady were both with us.

"Certainly; I will swear to it," says the old fellow. "I heard him with these ears say he was Ryder."

"Then our business is done," says the trap, "and I'm not sorry, considering the night." And his men surrounded my man and seized him. His face was as pale as the snow as he went off silent with his captors.

But now we were alone, and the guineas and the jewels were in my pockets. I love the jingle o' them, and so I took my counsel forthwith.

"Sir," says I to the old gentleman, "here be your purse and your papers; and to you, sir," says I to Harringay, "I restore the smelling salts—that is your charge. Miss, this, I'll warrant, is your jewels, the which I would advise you to place in a better security than heretofore. And now justice is done, and we conclude with a merry evening."

"But there is my purse!" says Harringay, in an amaze. "My purse with 50 guineas."

"Why, your purse must be where your heart is, in your boots," says I contemptuously, and called to the coachman.

"Give me that nag," says I.

And before he understood I was on the beast and, doffing to miss and her mother, rode off into the snowy night with a peal of laughter.